

Remarks by Congressman Charles A. Mosher
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The Congress and the Incongruous

President Enarson, distinguished guests, faculty, and especially today's candidates for scholarly awards, ladies and gentlemen:

One year ago, speaking here to the OSU degree candidates of August 1975, Hugh Sidey, a keen observer of presidents and other people, suggested that we Americans "need nothing so much as to recover our national sense of humor."

Sidey's good advice, to all of us, is that we need to cultivate humor, to enjoy laughter, and especially that people who hold great power need the wisdom and humility to recognize their own absurdities and to invite laughter.

He argued that true humor is a product of knowledge and understanding, of courage, confidence, love of life, and hope, of seeing life and ourselves in honest perspectives.

That seems particularly wise advice for each of us today who might be unduly puffed up because we are receiving very coveted degrees, earned or honorary, from this great university.

I shall attempt no additional advice for you this morning.

Instead, I will talk briefly about the Congress of the United States, and about Congressmen and Congresswomen, my own attempt to see these in honest perspective.

I remember being taught, in a freshman literature course, that the essence of humor is incongruity. And I must say there is much about the Congress that does seem incongruous!

Today's opinion polls say that no other institution, no other professions are lower in popular esteem. And yet, I suggest, no other institution today, nor any other profession wields such pervasive influence in the lives of all Americans. Some will say, not so pervasive as perverse. Either way, it is incongruous!

It is said that familiarity breeds contempt. Is that the reason for popular ridicule of the Congress? I will argue that genuine familiarity does not exist in this relationship; the public's knowledge and understanding of the congressional process is woefully inadequate. That, too, is an incongruity.

The Congress is supposed to represent the people. But I will argue it is in some ways too representative; too accurately it merely mirrors the popular mood and opinions of the moment, rather than being representative of the more informed, stable, wise elements of public opinion, rather than being representative in the sense that Congressmen are elected not only to be public servants, but also ^aexemplars and leaders.

An ancestral uncle of Mrs. Mosher, Hiram Pease, writing to his brother nearly 150 years ago, declared that "politicians are the meanest ticks that ever festered God's sheep." Thus, Uncle Hiram stated forcefully a view widely held throughout all 200 years of our history, and which undoubtedly will be popular 100 years hence. It is a hallowed, and largely healthy tradition that citizens have the right to make public officials and public institutions the butt of ridicule, to freely vent their frustrations and sometimes their angers on politicians. And Hugh Sidey is right, we politicians must accept with good grace and humor that humbling role of being the frequent target of ridicule, and we must learn from each such experience.

However, there is another side to that coin. Again, I suggest that the Congress is an accurate reflection of the very people who ridicule it, a microcosm which mirrors the American public as a whole...its diversity, its confusions and frustrations, its lack of adequate information and understanding, its complex mixture of strengths and weaknesses, genius and mediocrity, hopes, ambitions, anxieties, and essentially the same standards of personal morality. The humor in this relationship works both ways, the joke's on all of us!

The congressional process is intrinsically America and profoundly human, it is percolating always and everywhere, it is as large, dynamic, complicated and difficult to comprehend as is the nation itself. In more than a mystical sense, the congressional process is the whole people.

In Washington, it is cause for unhappy laughter that each year so many thousands of school children and other gullible tourists are told that they really are seeing the Congress in action, as they briefly and bewilderedly look down from the visitors' galleries upon the usually routine proceedings in the House and Senate chambers. With rare exceptions, those floor proceedings comprise the least significant, tiniest tip of the huge and fascinating legislative process which is not adequately reported by the news media, is not explained by congressmen to their constituents, is not adequately taught in the schools, and which goes largely unheeded by the people whom it affects the most.

I suspect that too few of you here this morning are fully aware, or perhaps care, that the Congress as an institution, this dynamic process of which you yourselves are part, plus the ways and responsibilities of congressmen, all are in a period of great stress and flux, of rapid, substantial change.

Of course, it should be obvious, a truism, that all our free institutions always will change, will evolve. That is the genius of the American system...and especially of our Constitution and the Bill of Rights... that it is so flexible, not rigid or brittle; it is designed to encourage and protect diversity, complexity, growth, change, evolving, and to reconcile dynamic tensions. That is inherently why with pride we now are able to celebrate the amazing stability of our nation, the miracle of America's resilience during 200 years of revolutionary experiments; but also recognizing that ours is a revolution never fully consummated, our stated principles only partly fulfilled; and that is why we can look ahead with assurance to the next century of opportunity for fruitful, revolutionary change.

Yes, all our institutions change. But the public seems too little aware of the extraordinary pace of changes in the Congress.

I have a running argument with the very bright editor of a leading daily paper in my district. I argue that his pages are too full of trivia. I say that he has an obligation...especially because of his first amendment privileges...a very demanding obligation to publish more substantive information and solid discussion, more enlightenment and less entertainment, especially concerning government. I tell him his paper's reporting of the Congress is scandalously superficial, that he gives far more attention to the local bowling league scores than to the how and why of voting decisions by the legislators elected from our area.

And the editor partly agrees with me, but he says that if he added more substantive reporting of the Congress, not ten percent of his readers would read it. "People don't care, aren't interested." he says. For the past year, his paper has published regularly a brief summary of voting by the congressmen

who represent its circulation area, and he tells me his readership survey shows that hardly one percent read those voting summaries. Presumably many times that percent study the bowling scores!

But I say a pox on those readership surveys and listener ratings that too much influence the content of our news media. And similarly a pox on those opinion polls to which too many politicians seem subservient. In several ways, the press and politicians are so often similar. There is raw humor in the way too many ^{IN} ~~of~~ both those professions (not all) pander largely to popular tastes rather than hold to their own professed standards.

Even if "only ten percent" of the public would read the more substantive information about Congress, I argue that that ten percent have an influence far greater than their numbers. Those relatively few readers could be, should be, the community leaders, the opinion makers, and I am convinced the media owe it to America to try harder, to provide a larger dose of quality and substance, to appeal more to that ten percent, and thus multiply their number to 20 percent. Is it not the supreme irony, cause for appreciative laughter in a democracy, that so-called popular government, in order to be viable, ^{SEEMS} ~~must~~ forever depend ^{ENT} on the vigilance and innovative leadership of the few?

^{BUT} ~~I~~ I refuse to accept the cynical premise that most Americans lack the wit or the will to be actively, perceptively interested in their own government. To accept that is, in effect, to surrender our fundamental belief that government shall be by consent of those governed...presumably, the informed consent of the governed. I submit that this nation's most vulnerable weakness today is a "bread and circuses" syndrome...government's over emphasis on merely indulging the public's desire to live in comfort, and the media's extreme over emphasis on indulging the public's appetite for mere enter-

tainment. A prime example is seen in the fact that we Americans continue blithely, recklessly in the "fool's paradise" ways we are burning scarce energy, and ~~both the government~~ ^{WE IN THE CONGRESS} and the media ^{too} still largely pamper this popular insanity.

The people crucially need, they deserve, and I believe a much larger proportion can be stimulated, galvanized into wanting hard information, the hard truth. And both the politicians and the press are seriously remiss in not providing that stimulation. It is imperative that the people not be so coddled, imperative that they be exposed constantly to more substantive information, provoked to do more hard, thorough thinking. They can and should acquire the habit of being more interested, alert, responsible...even though that habit would seriously threaten some now popular office holders, popular but superficial writers and media shows.

But I do assume that most of you who take your university degrees this morning shall be for years to come actively ~~part~~ ^{OF THE 10 PERCENT,} of that vigilant, effective leadership few who do galvanize and shape America.

Therefore, I think it important, I now dare to challenge today's popular skepticism concerning the Congress, to challenge your own skepticism, by offering here ten assertions of fact and of opinion somewhat contrary to what you read, hear and see in headlines and capsulized in the news media.

There is not time here to justify these ten assertions about the Congress with specific examples or other proof. And I do state them in oversimplified form. I recognize that all such truth, when analyzed, is fraught with paradox. Nevertheless, from my own 16 years on Capitol Hill, I am convinced the following statements are valid, and I ask each of you to try to believe, at least until you find sure proof that I am mistaken.

FIRST - Even though earlier I said that the Congress focuses and mirrors

too accurately the standards and mores of our society as a whole, I really do believe that the average integrity of men and women elected to the Congress is fully as high, and probably several degrees higher than the average integrity in other professions and in private industry. I am confident that I am not blind, nor naive in making that claim. All my adult life, as newsman and editor working in typical American communities and observing closely people of all classes and professions, I never have known any group whom I respected more than I do most (not all!) of my colleagues on Capitol Hill.

TWO - Yes, obviously, their frailties are real, will continue, and deserve to be publicized. And more deserve to be defeated and replaced by persons of greater courage and wisdom, than will be. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the capabilities, breadth of knowledge, understanding, alert concern, and the conscientious effort of today's members certainly does average higher than among earlier generations elected to the House of Representatives.

And the mix of those elected does change markedly, reflecting America's mobilities. The average age of congressmen is younger. More women are elected, more blacks, and a wider range of ethnic groups now are represented.

I know, many of you will see ironic humor here...that despite its better brains and advertised intentions, its improved staffing and better sources of information, more meetings, more roll calls...despite all these, this 94th Congress is notoriously indecisive, ineffective.

You will see ironic humor also...that despite my claims for its greater integrity, its increased awareness of ethical standards, during this 94th Congress the scandalous revelations about several members seem more sensational than ever before. But I urge you to understand that the behavior of these few is not typical.

Those two ironies would merit further discussion here. I wish we had the time and opportunity for a lively two-way exchange of views, to probe the causes for indecision in America today, as reflected in the Congress.

THREE - There are tremendously significant, fascinating changes in the substantive nature and the load of legislative and policy issues which burden the Congress, an increasing variety and breadth of subject matter, much more complex, technical, sophisticated, much more difficult to fathom. Thus, there is much greater need for better trained people in Congress, and in its supporting roles.

FOUR - The ombudsman function of congressmen also has burgeoned rapidly; the insistence and variety of constituent demands compound!

FIVE - The rhythm and intensity of congressional life is changed. Only a few years ago, it still was assumed to be a part-time job. The sessions usually ended in July or August and representatives went back to their home districts for the rest of the year, where most had other active vocations and depended on other sources of income. They practiced law, farmed, ran banks, were physicians, teachers, editors, insurance salesmen...or what else? But today, being in Congress is more than a full-time, year-round job; most members make only hurried, hectic, weekend visits to their districts. Obviously, that makes much more difficult any person-to-person communing with the proverbial man in the street.

SIX - Today, each congressman's outside interests and income are required to be publicized and are severely scrutinized as suspect. It is generally condemned as unethical to serve in the House while also practicing law or being a banker. And not only in these new rules against conflict of interest, but concerning the whole gamut of behavior standards demanded of congressmen, there is a strong shift in the public's mood from indifferent tolerance, to awareness, vigilance, insistence.

SEVEN - Undoubtedly the most crucial need in this changing Congress is for better coordinated, more effective procedures and resources to process coherently the mounting volume and complexity of information we need...to get it, sort it, submit it to extremely thorough, systematic analysis, present

it cogently, comprehend it...to understand better the very difficult problems we must attack, the historic opportunities we should grasp, the priorities we should choose, the options available, and their probable consequences.

Attempting to meet these needs, we have expanded and strengthened the professional calibre of our staffs, have organized new research and investigative groups, have devised other ways to borrow and buy expertise. (And, as a footnote, I want to attest personally to my own indebtedness to excellent staff support. Good staff can make a mediocre congressman look very good...or, sometimes, visa versa.)

But responsibility and jurisdictional lines remain scandalously fragmented and overlapping in the Congress; in desperate need of enlightened reorganization. A new revolution there would have been the superb way to celebrate this bicentennial year. But we muffed that opportunity miserably!

EIGHT - We have indeed adopted several hopeful reforms. The longtime, very rigid seniority system is under strong attack, is giving, bending, but is still operable. Practically all committee sessions...notably including the crucial markup and conference committee sessions, which always were closed as recently as four years ago...all these now are open to the public. Literally hundreds of voting decisions which very recently would have been hidden, off the record, are now made in the public glare, strictly on the record, both in committees and on the House floor. In the last Congress there were a total of 632 roll calls of the yeas and nays in the House, compared with only 240 during 1961-62, my first term. That contrast will be even greater by the end of this 94th Congress for an almost three-fold increase. And similarly, there were a total ^{of} 5,888 meetings of House committees during the last Congress, and there will be more than 7,000 in the present term, compared with less than half that number only 16 years ago.

NINE - Probably the most desired and urgent need for the individual congressman or congresswoman today is time and opportunity to be quiet, to do the necessary reading and study one never gets done, to reflect, to stand away and try to see it all in clearer perspective, with greater understanding and assurance...and, yes, with more humor.

But it is the very essence of every congressman's life that he (or she) has no privacy, ~~is~~^{BUT} is enslaved to hub-bub, the incessant buffeting by demanding people and on-rushing events, problems, opportunities, decisions. His are extremely crowded, fragmented, hectic, hop-skip-and-jumpful days. It is the proverbial fishbowl existence. The attractive emoluments and perquisites of congressional service are frequently publicized; but the disadvantages, the penalties are seldom recognized.

Is it significant that a record number of incumbent congressmen who have "safe" seats, who know they could be reelected, have voluntarily decided to retire this year? (A young Ohio colleague of mine ruefully tells me that he and his wife have thought it through and have decided that the second worst possible thing that could happen to them this fall, would be for him to be reelected to the Congress!)

TEN - The Congress often is described as a central arena in which innumerable, diverse interests...economic, regional, social, vocational, political, etc., including the diverse interests of this university...all these are in fierce, ceaseless competition, each for its share of America. Another way to describe the Congress is as an assembly of 535 individuals... 100 Senators, 435 Representatives...highly individualistic, willful, ambitious, aggressive, and of many differing traditions, distinctly different training and experience, elected to represent very different constituencies. Thus, the myriad voices of this restless, dynamic nation are heard on Capitol Hill.

But the prime function of the Congress is to be much more than an arena of competing interests, more than a cacophony of many spokesmen. Its imperative function should be to achieve coherent, effective national policy. That is why the Congress is best described as process, essentially a process intended to achieve understanding and at least majority agreement out of disagreement.

And that is largely a conceptual process, requiring long periods of time and varied means to obtain basic information and advice, in the search for understanding...long sessions of taking testimony, of probing questions, of intensive study, analysis and synthesis, of discussion and argument, argument, argument, of skillfully writing decisions into legislative form; and also of bargaining, amending, accommodating, compromising...moving the bills through cumbersome, tortuous parliamentary procedures and levels to that point of final agreement by both houses, and then the President's signature which makes these decisions an Act, the law.

Now, to summarize, I have listed these ten aspects of the Congress (and others, perhaps more significant, could be told)...I have listed these to emphasize that this is a process undergoing historic stress and change: I commend it to you as fascinating, exciting, powerful, profoundly important. It is essentially a conceptual process, thus it deserves to be of particular fascination and concern to this university community. It is an increasingly open process, to which each of you has new, more significant access. It is all this, and yes, amusing, too!

You who receive academic awards today are of that most influential ten percent who have a very special responsibility to be actively part of this decision-making process. And there are so many, many ways beckoning to you to become more actively part of it.

In fact, that responsibility is inescapable for each of us present this morning. Even the so-called "turned off" citizen who says, "what's the use?" who cynically scorns government and tries to escape by way of boob-tube entertainment, or some other opiate...even that citizen's ignorance and abstention is no zero, it is unwittingly an overt influence, a significant part of the process.

But I ask each of you now to play the more active, more responsible, positive role. Returning to Hugh Sidey's wise advice, that people in positions of power need the grace to recognize and admit their own sometime absurdities, I say that almost every healthy individual in this land of the free...but particularly each of you in the more influential ten percent...each is in fact a powerful person; each should have the wit to be a positive part of the process, ~~AND TO AVOID THE ABSURDITY OF NOT PARTICIPATING.~~

I assure you, there is hardly any more effective influence on your congressman than an individual constituent's knowledgeable opinion, cogently and forceably stated...and, for emphasis, best stated repeatedly.

Please do!

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